



STATE OF RHODE ISLAND AND PROVIDENCE PLANTATIONS
HISTORICAL PRESERVATION & HERITAGE COMMISSION

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**COTTON AND SILK, RAYON AND NYLON:
ORIENTAL MILLS LISTED ON NATIONAL REGISTER**

A compact collection of mill buildings developed between 1860 and 1986 in the North End of Providence has received federal recognition for its contributions to the history of architecture, engineering, and industry. Frederick C. Williamson, Chairman of the Rhode Island Historical Preservation & Heritage Commission, announced that the National Park Service has added Oriental Mills to the National Register of Historic Places. The National Register is the Federal Government's official list of properties throughout the United States whose historical and architectural significance makes them worthy of preservation. Oriental Mills is significant for its longstanding use as a textile factory, beginning with cotton fabrics, then silk threads, and finally synthetics. The buildings retain a high degree of architectural integrity and reflect the distinctive characteristics of mid-nineteenth to early-twentieth-century textile mill architecture and engineering.

Oriental Mills is located in the North End of Providence on a 3-acre property bounded by Admiral Street to the north, Whipple Street to the west, and Route 146 and Oriental Street to the east. The mill complex consists of several linked single- and multi-story brick, wood-frame, and steel-frame industrial buildings. These buildings are connected, in some cases by party walls, and in other cases, by narrow alleys and irregular spaces that were later framed and roofed over. Many of the buildings within the complex share common construction materials and architectural features,

including shallow-pitch and flat roofs; fire-resistive, wood-frame interior construction; and brick walls with segmental-arch window openings.

The industrial development of the North End of Providence in the mid-nineteenth century was driven by crowded conditions downtown, the increasing size of cotton manufacturing companies, and the extension of the Providence and Worcester Railroad to the area in 1847. Owners of farm properties and country estates sold off large parcels of land, which were platted and subdivided. New industries included the Corliss Steam Engine plant (1849), Silver Spring Bleaching and Dyeing Works (1864-70), and the Wanskuck Company (1862).

Wealthy from the East India trade, Alfred Augustus Reed bought land known as the Greenland Vale on Whipple Street and formed the Oriental Mills Manufacturing Company around 1860. He hired Providence civil engineer Niles Schubarth, designer of Swan Point Cemetery and Cove Park basin and promenade, to build a small cotton works. The Oriental Mills spun and wove cotton to make cloth and produced print cloths and cambric. Reed expanded his empire by converting several mills in Warwick into the Oriental Print works for dyeing and printing cotton cloth. After more than thirty years of cotton manufacturing, the Oriental Mills Manufacturing Company suffered financial failure caused by the Panic of 1893 and went out of business.

In 1893, J.P. Campbell purchased the property, replaced the outdated machinery, and produced cotton goods and woolens there. By 1900, the J.P. Campbell & Company complex consisted of the main building with an attached boiler house and two other buildings connected by bridges; a one-story brick office building; a two-story, brick storehouse; and a one-story waste house. Some of the land west of the mill complex was developed for worker housing, particularly on Whipple and Fillmore streets. In 1901, Campbell & Company employed 250 workers who operated 20,000 spindles, 500 looms, 65 carding machines, and three pickers. The operation ran smoothly for 14 years, but collapsed during the Panic of 1907.

In 1908, the land, buildings, and contents of the J.P. Campbell & Company at Oriental Mill

were auctioned to the highest bidder. Edgar J. Lowenstein purchased most of the buildings and land; and the machinery, storehouse and land to the south were auctioned off separately. Lowenstein established the American Silk Spinning Company and erected multiple additions to expand the facility and to meet the rapidly increasing demand for silk yarn. In the 1930s and 1940s, American Silk's new synthetics and silk blends placed it at the forefront of the textile industry. It was the one of the first firms in Providence to manufacture rayon. During World War II, the company developed techniques for spinning new fiber from discarded nylon fibers and silk stockings.

The Top Company of Boston purchased American Silk in 1959 and continued to run it until 1962, when they sold the property to the Union Paper and Union Transbag Companies owned by Alan and Melvin Frank. The buildings are presently used for plastic printing and office space.

The National Register nomination for Oriental Mills was prepared by Virginia Adams, Jenny Fields, and Mark Rayburn of PAL, Inc. According to Edward F. Sanderson, executive director of the RI Historical Preservation & Heritage Commission, "Cotton was the foundation of manufacturing at the Oriental Mill, but later owners innovated with silk thread and synthetic fabrics. Today this historic mill is being rehabilitated for commercial offices, another economic transformation assisted by historic preservation tax credits."

In addition to honoring a property for its contribution to local, state, or national history, listing on the National Register provides additional benefits. It results in special consideration during the planning for Federal or federally assisted projects and makes properties eligible for Federal and Rhode Island tax benefits for historic rehabilitation projects. Owners of private property listed in the National Register are free to maintain, manage, or dispose of their property as they choose. As the state office for historic preservation, the Historical Preservation & Heritage Commission is the state agency responsible for reviewing and submitting Rhode Island nominations to the National Register.

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